

# Relating Integrity to Interpretation

Patricia M. O'Donnell

**L**andscape interpretation is the process of providing the visitor with tools to engage in an experience of the landscape as it existed during its period of significance or as it has evolved to the present. These tools may vary widely to include traditional wayside exhibits and self-guided tour brochures, a creative representation of a lost feature, or an interactive device that presents some aspect of the landscape, expresses a historical skill or perception, or communicates historical lifeways.

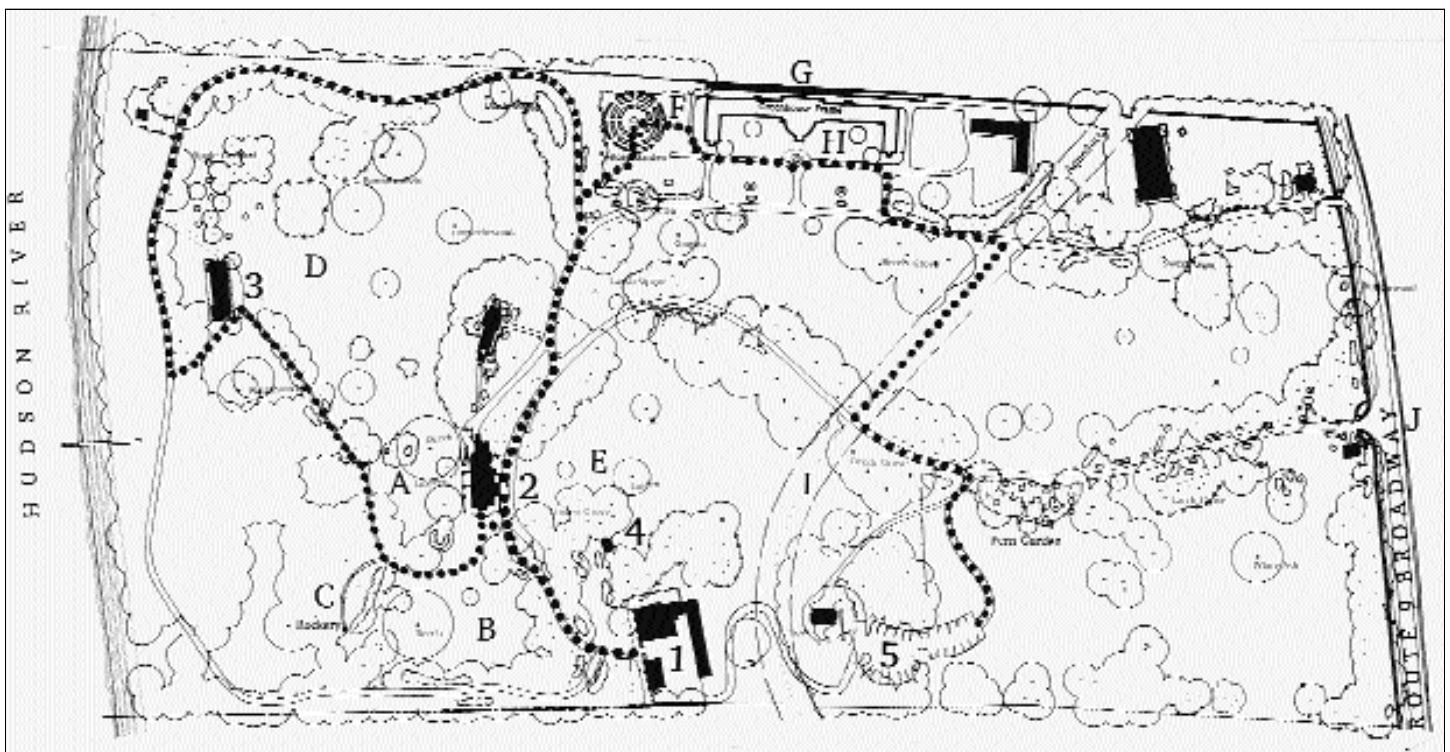
Selecting an approach for interpreting a landscape is related to several factors, but is most closely linked to the level of integrity of the landscape, and therefore, its ability to convey the historic character and character-defining features of the past. The integrity of a cultural landscape can be defined as high, moderate, or low. This article explores the relationship between the level of integrity of a landscape and the techniques for conveying its significance to the public through six examples.

## High Integrity

In a landscape with high integrity, the historic character of the landscape is quite intact, although subtle changes may have occurred from the historic period, such as vegetative growth. As a result, interpretation can direct the visitor's attention to the existing charac-

ter-defining features of the landscape—the spatial organization, topography, circulation, vegetation, structures, small-scale elements, furnishings and objects, and the overall setting and surroundings. The goal of interpretation is to aid the participant in gaining an understanding of the landscape as a cultural expression by describing the significance of what exists. In the case of Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve on Whidbey Island in Washington State, the National Park Service (NPS), Pacific Northwest Region, has collaborated with the state and local governments to preserve a highly intact agricultural landscape. Recognizing that the reserve encompasses a vital community and that most of the land remains in private ownership, the approach to interpretation is modest. As proposed, the interpretation of this 17,400-acre reserve is concentrated in only 12 locations which include wayside exhibits that provide the visitor with historical data about the region and the intact cultural and natural resources in their presence. Additionally, a kiosk is located within the town of Coupeville to alert the casual visitor to the historic significance of the area and to direct them to important resources and waysides outside of town (see related article on page 41).

At Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site, the former Frederick W. Vanderbilt Estate in Hyde Park, NY, the cultural landscape retains a high degree of integrity and consideration is being given to restoring missing or altered landscape features so that the visitor can experience the mansion and landscape as if it were still a private estate. It was determined that, given the character of the estate landscape, the placement of wayside exhibits would not be appropriate. Instead, based on the historical facts and drawings in the 1993 Cultural Landscape Report, a self-guided tour is recommended. The tour would draw the visitor through the designed landscape



A plan of "Lyndhurst" in Tarrytown, NY, as it exists today with a suggested tour route, part of a self-guided tour brochure developed to provide information on the historic development and significance of the landscape. Illustration courtesy of LANDSCAPES.

experiencing the grand Hudson River vistas, the ridge and woodland trails dating to the early-19th century, the details of the main gate, the entry sugar maple tree allée, and the decorative arbors of the formal gardens. Within the formal gardens, one greenhouse will be reconstructed, while other lost greenhouses will be interpreted through foundation outlines and ghost frames which provide a sense of scale and massing within the space.

### Moderate Integrity

Moderate integrity exists when much of the cultural landscape remains, but there are notable losses of character-defining features and some features are in remnant form. As such, the focus of the interpretation is on what remains, along with a comparison of what exists with the character of the landscape during the historic period. On two former estates, “Lyndhurst” in Tarrytown, NY, a property of the National Trust, and “Eagle’s Nest,” William Kissam Vanderbilt’s estate in Centerport, Long Island, the historic designed landscapes are intact to a moderate degree with several components in remnant form. For each of these properties, a self-guided tour brochure has been developed providing information on the historic development and significance of the landscape, while conveying a sense of the people who shaped it. The self-guided tours are in the form of a property map which is marked with a tour route. Keyed into these maps are a series of historic photographs illustrating each numbered tour stop or station. The inclusion of the historic views allows the touring visitor to see the area of the landscape as it appeared in the historic period, to identify the remaining historic features and to make comparisons between the historic and existing conditions. Small number blocks, cut in stone, are recommended to be set flush with the grade at each tour stop so that the visitor knows they are in the right place. For Lyndhurst, the landscape tour is arranged in two loops with the upper loop accessible to the disabled, while the lower loop involves a longer walk and often a more steeply sloping gradient.

### Low Integrity

A cultural landscape with low integrity offers the greatest challenge for interpretation. In these cases, subtle evidence of landscape character may remain while historic documentation provides more detailed, but often incomplete, information. In these remnant historic landscapes, it is important to paint a broader picture to convey a sense of the character of the landscape that has only a few clues to offer in its current form. Through creative interpretation techniques, the historic themes, rich associations, and lost settings can be evoked and, in turn, imagined by the visitor.

At the Cornelius Low House, the former Raritan Landing community, now New Brunswick, NJ, the reduction of land area over a period of years, which can be thought of as “historical compression,” has reduced the Low House property to a mere two acres with an adjacent access route completely lacking integrity. The visitor approaches the rear of the 1740 stone dwelling from an off-site parking lot (shared with the Rutgers University athletic fields) through a somewhat disorienting conjunction of historic and contemporary features. A decision was made to use this walk as a path through time to explore the layers of history that are a part of this property. There are five interpretive stations along this path and three in the two-acre property’s historic core. Each station has a bronze plaque with text and illustrations while the five on the walk also include three-dimensional elements. One station evokes the Country Estate era (1830 to 1960) with a large, iron bird cage that was found on the site, and whose historic location is unknown. Using photographic documentation of the owner with a bird in the cage, an iron silhouette of an ostrich is placed in the cage. Farther along the path, a dock scene represents the thriving, bustling life of Raritan Landing in the years before the American Revolution with full-scale goods and workers in silhouette. Later, a Revolutionary-era map is embedded into the ground plane in stone and bronze. This 22’-wide map

*(O’Donnell—continued on page 14)*



The east lawn at Lyndhurst showing trees planted by Paulding and Merritt, c. 1870. Photo courtesy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



The east lawn today. Photo by author.

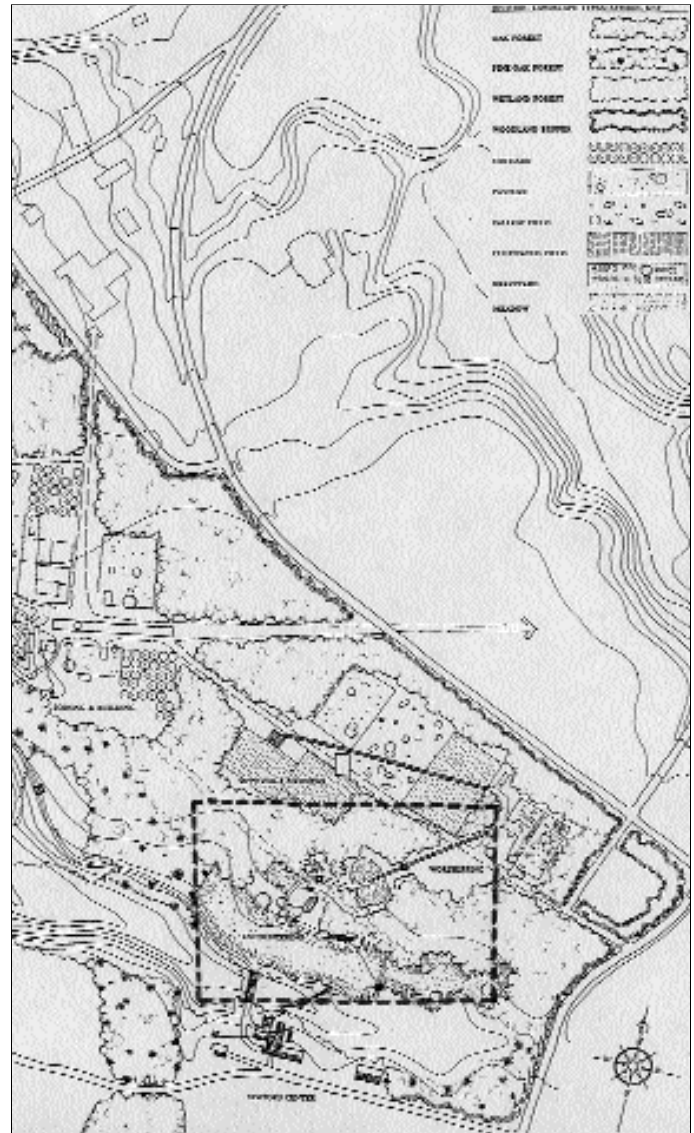
is large enough to accommodate a group of school children and each element can be used for rubbings. As the path approaches the core area, a grid of living antique apple trees forms a small orchard. The path winds through this sloping area in switchbacks to provide people with a full experience of the grove. Additional stations are provided, as the path enters the historic core area that interpret the Raritan River view to the south, the view over the former village of Raritan Landing, and the Low House itself. As an interpretive technique, the stations embody historic information regarding the periods of the landscape's history that are not easily discernable in a tactile manner.

The author, in collaboration with Graham Landscape Architecture and American History Workshop, has been working with St. Mary's City to develop an exciting approach to an extremely significant landscape with low integrity.<sup>1</sup> St. Mary's City is the colonial capital of Maryland, inhabited from 1634 to 1708, with incredibly rich archeological resources, but no original structures remaining. The city has been extensively researched over a period of more than two decades by the professional staff of Historic St. Mary's City. This historical and archeological research is the basis for formulating a compelling concept for an interactive, educational, fun, outdoor learning center. Three recorded voices will tell the story of St. Mary's City to the visitor—the late-20th century researcher, the colonial resident from written accounts, and the costumed historic reenactor.

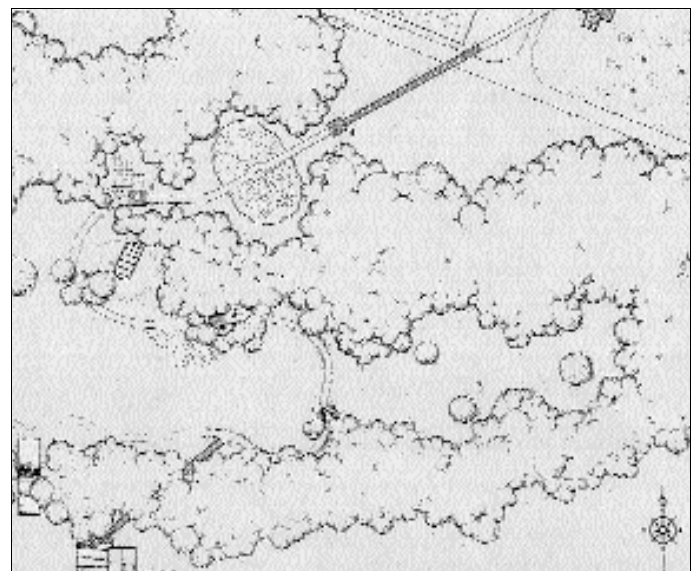
The historical and archeological research is being used to interpret basic human qualities and concerns—ideas about diet, seasonality, skill, family, community relationships, spirituality, power, diplomacy, and economic ambition. The sense of extreme differences, an absolute foreignness, between the lives of the people of 17th century and contemporary Americans will be a theme expressed through all interpretive devices and the landscape itself.

The landscape has been divided into settings and each has a theme with an active word. In the "Encountering" exhibit, an American Indian longhouse known to have been used in the tidewater region is located at the edge of a clearing managed by burning and surrounded by a native forest. Traditional medicinal and edible plants will be grown in the woodland margins and visitors will be directed to these plants. As visitors continue their exploration, they will be presented with themes titled "Worshipping," "Growing," "Joining & Building," "Digging" (a mobile archeology station), "Defending & Protecting" (focused on the fortification), "Trading & Traveling," "Working & Playing," and "Governing." The goal of interpretation is to engage the visitor with each of these settings by contrasting the past and present.

Each theme will include an area from one to 10 acres framed by woodlands. The landscape will be revegetated, over a period of years with the pre-contact and post-contact plantings of the 17th century. The plantings will be organized based on both ecological associations (pine-oak, oak and lowland woods, burned meadow) and human created compositions (orchard, pasture, fallow field, cultivated field). Detailed settings will be established around buildings and building sites, such as work-



Interpretive plan for Historic Saint Mary's City. Illustration courtesy of LANDSCAPES, Graham Landscape Architecture, and American History Workshop.



Encountering cluster exhibit. Illustration courtesy of LANDSCAPES, Graham Landscape Architects, and American History Workshop.

yard and small seedling garden. These environments will contain native and imported plants known to have been present in the region during the St. Mary's City occupancy.

The visitor will circulate through the city on a contemporary path. The original plan of the historic town was organized around a butterfly-shaped circulation system. The new visitor path will intersect the historic system at several points. The visitor path will change from boardwalk to concrete, with the historic butterfly path surfaced in a contrasting gravel. The concrete, colored to resemble dried mud, will be imprinted, at intervals, with hoof prints, paw prints, foot prints, and plant impressions and, as such, serve as an interpretive element.

The interpretive devices will be clear products of our time, blended creatively with objects, words and lifeways from the past. Each device will demonstrate an aspect of the themes of the area calling for an interaction, a perception, a feeling to be evoked. Planning also addresses practical needs including visitor services, disabled access, and maintenance.

As a culture, our tendency is to focus on built elements, therefore, interpretation of the cultural landscape is

absolutely necessary for the average visitor at an historic property in order to understand the history of the landscape. Integrity of the landscape has a direct relationship to the manner in which a property is best interpreted to the public. Selecting the most suitable interpretive tools and devices can succeed in engaging the public with a place, and enriching their experience by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural landscape.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> The project is a collaboration of LANDSCAPES Landscape Architecture, Planning, Historic Preservation, Graham Landscape Architecture and American History Workshop. Working with Historic St. Mary's City, an approach to these fascinating archeological resources has been developed over the past year.

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*(Rabinowitz—continued from page 11)*

also the town planning assumptions that turned old village centers into sacred spaces. Statues in public parks commemorate local and national heroes, or ethnically-significant figures like Columbus or Kosciusko.

That's all very well for noting the major events of community founding, of wars and revolutions? What of the patterns of ordinary life in the past—how can they be recognized and interpreted amid the contemporary landscape?

The "ordinary" landscape offers many opportunities for rich interpretive interventions. In downtown Holyoke, MA, a water fountain richly ornamented with healthful messages communicates the ideological battle of the Women's Christian Temperance Union against Demon Rum in the early years of the 20th century. On the same model, street furniture can be splendid containers for contextualizing messages. Manhold covers "model" the transformation of a city's infrastructure, a park bench "carries" the history of children's play, steps in the pavement "register" the weekly rhythms of 19th-century market-days or the jammed downtowns of Saturday nights in American towns of the pre-television years. A bronze beaver on Portland's Morrison Street reminds Oregonians of an early export commodity, just as the Niketown store celebrates the newest variety.

Adroit pieces of public art like these reinsert historical and cultural complexity into places that are otherwise always tending toward the bland uniformity of American commercial environments. A community's history is its unique claim and most precious source of identity. By preserving or providing anew evidences of a place's superseded forms of everyday life, we legitimate the many contributors to its history.

In many of our outdoor interpretation projects, we create suggestive fragments of the past world. Visitors step-

ping onto the frame of a 1920s trolley car are much more likely to understand the way people traveled to work than by reading a plaque with hard-to-decipher maps. A pile of bricks, a trowel, and a mortar pan immediately communicate the hand labor of building. An artist's easel and palette, with a stool stationed in just the right position, draws visitors into looking at the landscape with the eyes of a painter. In such projects, we are inspired by the poet Mark Strand's lines, "In a field/I am the absence/of field./This is/always the case./Wherever I am/I am what is missing."

Conversely, what we sometimes wish to restore to a site is the scale of the human figure. The sculptural figures of artists like Seward Johnson or George Segal often powerfully communicate human presence in haunting ways, and tell good historical stories. Lloyd Lillie's twin statues of James Michael Curley in a Boston vest-pocket park frame the legendary mayor in two guises, as an orator and as a pal with whom you can share a park bench. All that's missing is a voting-box under the bench, with the famous doggerel legend, "Vote often and early/For James Michael Curley." Of course, by now it's started to rain in Skye. As I scamper to shelter in the mist, inspired by these interpretive dreams, I can look down into the peat and see the archeological remains of eons of plant and animal life. Tales of the faeries spring to mind. I can hear the bagpipes sending off the brave lads to the slaughters at Ypres and the Somme in 1916. Carts of kelp are being loaded onto vessels during the Napoleonic Wars. A radical leader of the local crofters is denouncing absentee landlords on the church steps in the 1880s.

I am a part of each of these moments and their steward.

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